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AUTHOR Christians, Clifford G.
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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire regarding the teaching of media ethics courses was sent to communication program administrators in 1977. This paper reports the responses obtained from 237 programs (96% response rate). For the 27% of schools reporting specific courses in ethics, the paper notes the number and types of schools with ethics courses, the place of ethics courses in the curriculum, and specific types of courses offered; for the remaining schools, it reports the reasons given for not teaching such courses. The paper also presents findings concerning pedagogical techniques used by media ethics instructors, the value systems stressed in ethics courses, and textbook materials used, and it offers general observations on the data. Titles of specific audiovisual materials and textbooks mentioned by survey respondents are included. (GW)

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# COURSES IN MEDIA ETHICS

A
Spring 1977 Survey

by
Clifford G. Christians, Ph.D.
Institute of Communications Research
University of Illinois
Urbana, Illinois 61801

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## I. INTRODUCTION - PROCEDURES

The immediate impetus for this survey arises from some research the University of Illinois is presently conducting into the ethical dilemmas faced by professional communicators (sponsored by the McCormick Foundation). As one reflects on the issues considered by media practitioners to be morally problematical, he begins asking about the instructional process and its role in preparing communication students for careers which require ethical awareness.

My purpose is a straightforward one-- to ascertain the current state-of-the-art in teaching media ethics. This survey identifies specific ethics courses being taught in journalism-RTV-advertising programs and delineates their primary features.

Two forms were prepared, much of their inspiration coming from Thomas F. McMahon's definitive study of ethics instruction in business schools (available from the University of Virginia, Center for the Study of Applied Ethics, Charlottsville, Virginia 11906). Mary Mander, Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Illinois, organized the details.

The first one-page form was mailed early in 1977 to the head administrator of the 247 communication programs listed in the January 1977 Journalism Educator. 237 of the 247 questionnaires have been returned (96%), with 100% returns from the 67 sequences in the list which are accredited.

This first survey identified 66 schools with specific courses devoted to ethics. The instructors were sent a 3-page questionnaire inquiring about the nature and content of their course. 64 of these forms (97%) have been completed and returned. All instructors also included a course outline; numerous other materials (exams, bibliographies, student handouts) were sent along by most. 56% added personal letters or extensive comments on the back. All but 5 (92%) asked for the results of this survey to be mailed to them.

The substantial return rate may reflect the simple form used (at least the first one to administrators), and our sending personal cover letters and self-addressed first-class stamped envelopes. I suspect it does not reflect some kind of moral compulsion to indicate that "our school takes ethics seriously." In any case, with both surveys a follow-up letter was sent to those not responding the first time..

## II. SCHOOLS WITH SPECIFIC COURSES IN ETHICS

As noted in Table 1, 27% of the 237 schools which responded have a specific course in ethics. Some non-accredited schools have only

limited sequences, making separate ethics courses physically impossible. The overall quality and range connected with graduate programs reflects in a higher percentage (48%) of courses offered. However, in general terms, factors of size and accreditation did not influence the percentages substantially.

SPECIFIC ETHICS COURSES

| | total schools | No. with courses | % with courses |
|---|---|---|---|
| Non-accredited schools | 170 | 43 | 25% |
| Accredited schools | 67 | 23 | 34% |
| Schools with 500 or more majors | 42 | 15 | 33% |
| Schools with 50 or more grad students | 39 | 19 | 48% |
| All schools | 237 | 66 | 27% |

Table 1

The majority of the programs offering a special course in ethics require it for their students, present it on the undergraduate level, and teach it every semester. A further breakdown of those curricular matters appears below in Table 2:

PLACE IN CURRICULUM
(of 64 schools responding)

| | No. | % |
|---|---|---|
| Status for degree | | |
| Elective | 23 | 36% |
| Required | 38 | 59% |
| Option to fulfill requirement | 03 | 05% |
| Class Level | | |
| Undergraduate | 42 | 65% |
| Graduate | 06 | 10% |
| Both combined | 16 | 25% |
| Teaching Schedule | | |
| Every semester of quarter | 28 | 43% |
| Annually | 26 | 41% |
| Alternate years | 07 | 11% |
| Rarely | 03 | 05% |

Table 2

It was not too difficult to determine whether the courses offered were devoted fundamentally to ethics. Some arbitrariness was inevitable in distinguishing these courses from those with a broader intent to discuss modern issues. However, in every doubtful case, we sent the follow-up form to the instructors involved and received a course outline from them. These materials were assessed in determining whether to include these courses. In virtually every situation we used the administrator's or instructor's self-description as to whether this was a course specifically in ethics or not.

The word "ethics" provided a negative boundary: if it was in the course title we included it (though obviously that word was not a requirement of a course to be listed as specifically devoted to ethics). In fact, titles for these courses varied greatly. Typical ones were, "Journalism Ethics," "Law and Ethics," "Ethics and Mass Communications," "Social Responsibility of the Media," "Ethical Problems of the Press." If one selects key words from the titles, "ethics" appeared in 83% of them. "Law" is involved as a major context for 30% of the courses. Moreover, 28 of the 64 instructors (44%) have some formal training, nearly all of it in law. "My credentials," wrote one respondent, "is that I am an attorney; I passed the ethics test of the California bar." Such factors indicate a need for discussion over the boundaries between ethics and law. No one in the survey views law as the maximum standard and 48 respondents (75%) see it as only one element in determining ethics. In addition, 4 schools offer courses in both ethics and law, and most programs include a course in law by itself. However, very few respondents showed any concern for distinguishing law and ethics as two different frames of reference, and it warrants further research whether courses combining the two do not de facto influence students toward equating the legal with the ethical. Additional information on titles appears in Table 3 below.

KEY WORDS IN TITLES OF ETHICS COURSES

| | No. | % |
|---|---|---|
| "Ethics" | 55 | 83% |
| "Social Responsibility | 14 | 21% |
| "Values" | 01 | 02% |
| "Law" | 20 | 30% |
| "Journalism" | 09 | 14% |
| "Communications" | 19 | 29% |
| "Mass Media" | 15 | 23% |
| "Press" | 11 | 17% |

Table 3

## III. SCHOOLS NOT HAVING A SPECIFIC ETHICS COURSE

Of the 237 schools responding, 171 (73%) do not teach a special course in media ethics. Table 4 indicates how they react to a list of reasons for not offering such a course.

REASONS FOR NOT OFFERING A COURSE IN ETHICS

| | No. of schools | % |
|---|---|---|
| Ethical issues are discussed as they arise in other courses | 150 | 88% |
| Small dept. with limited program | 24 | 14% |
| No good instructional material exists | 07 | 04% |
| No clear evidence ethics can be taught well in the classroom | 06 | 03% |
| No available room in the curriculum | 06 | 03% |
| No qualified person to teach the course | 04 | 03% |
| Handled by philosophy dept. | 03 | 02% |
| Lack of interest in student body | 02 | 01% |
| Lack of interest among faculty | 02 | 01% |

Note: The totals reflect the fact that 21 of the 171 total schools checked more than one reason as applicable to their situation.

Table 4

The conclusion is obvious. 88% of the schools without an ethics course believe it is pedagogically more sound to treat ethical issues as they arise in the classroom. None of the 171 schools argues that ethics are not pertinent to the curriculum. This option was offered in the survey but no one marked it. 25 respondents added explanations or comments at this point, insisting, for example, that "ethics are rooted in the fabric of all media study" and noting that "our faculty feels this is the best approach." Some, in fact, make the case much stronger, suggesting that because their schools feel so intensely about ethics, for this very reason they insist that students should encounter such issues throughout the curriculum during the entire semester. In a slightly different vein, a few argue that in the "real world" ethical questions arise situationally day-by-day, therefore, that is the most natural way of treating them in the classroom also.

It should be observed further that 134 of the 150 schools who rely on discussions of ethics throughout the curriculum also have specific chapters or sections devoted to ethics. In those recording actual percentages of time, some schools give 50-70% of classroom hours to these ethics units in such courses as "Journalism in a Free Society." Others noted that ethical matters come up "virtually every day" in news editing and reporting.

Twenty-four schools do not offer courses in ethics because they have limited programs and staffs. A variation of the same theme is the overload of various faculty, "teaching 5 different courses per year already" in one instance.

Three schools deliberately encourage or require their students to take ethics from the philosophy department. One such school wrote, for example: "Our philosophy department offers several excellent ethics courses which many of our majors take. Much of the specifics and the examples used in these courses are taken from contemporary journalism." Another says: "Our core curriculum calls for 3 courses in philosophy, preferably an ethics course; do we need more, also taught in our department?" All three are non-state, small private colleges with a religious orientation.

Out of the 171 schools, 10 have plans to offer an ethics course within a year and 6 have a committee studying its feasibility. One of the 10 noted that they thought they had been meeting student demand by emphasizing ethics everywhere in the classroom, but were finally persuaded by students this year that this was not sufficient. Therefore, a specific ethics course will be offered this Fall.

## IV. PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUES USED BY INSTRUCTORS IN MEDIA ETHICS

In an effort to determine how well classroom procedures for teaching ethics are developed, a listing of 20 possible techniques was suggested. The results from the 64 ethics courses are ranked in order of popularity in Table 5.

PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUES USED IN ETHICS COURSES

| | no. of courses | % |
|---|---|---|
| lectures by instructor | 56 | 87% |
| case studies | 45 | 70% |
| small group discussion | 36 | 56% |
| student presentations on topics of their own choosing | 35 | 55% |
| lectures by outside professionals | 34 | 53% |
| in-depth study of a few selected issues | 28 | 44% |
| panels of opposing viewpoints | 20 | 31% |
| students report interviews with professionals | 19 | 29% |
| films | 15 | 23% |
| audio-tapes | 13 | 20% |
| video-tapes | 11 | 17% |
| overhead transparencies | 11 | 17% |
| slides | 10 | 15% |
| sample surveys taken of local media outlets | 10 | 15% |
| lectures by academics from other depts. (e.g. philosophy) | 10 | 15% |
| role playing | 08 | 12% |
| simulation games | 03 | 05% |
| novels or plays | 01 | 01% |
| clippings | 01 | 01% |
| glossy prints | 01 | 01% |

Note: Totals indicate that respondents checked as many as apply.

Table 5

The most typical procedure appears to be a combination of lectures by instructor, classroom visits by professionals, discussions, and student research papers (with a focus in 45 courses on case studies). Twenty-one of the 64 (33%) do not use any audio-visuals at all (i.e., tapes, films, overheads, slides, prints, or clippings).

On the positive side, as noted in Table 6, several checked a number of possibilities from the list, the highest being an instructor who uses 13 of the 20 options and the lowest a course devoted solely to lecture by instructor. The combinations:

NO. OF TECHNIQUES USED IN ETHICS COURSES

| Total techniques used | No no. of classes |
|---|---|
| 13 | 01 |
| 12 | 01 |
| 11 | 02 |
| 10 | 02 |
| 09 | 03 |
| 08 | 07 |
| 07 | 12 |
| 06 | 09 |
| 05 | 07 |
| 04 | 08 |
| 03 | 08 |
| 02 | 03 |
| 01 | 01 |
| | 64 total |

Table 6

Several audio-visual titles were suggested as helpful, though resources of this kind are decidedly minimal.

a. Audio-tapes

1) "The Pentagon Papers Case" (N.Y. Times tape)
2) "Tribute to Edward R. Murrow" (NPR)
3) "National News Council Deliberations"
4) "Free Press-Fair Trial" by Linda Deutsch
5) Network news coverage of Eagleton affair and some presidential press conferences of R.N.
6) Class presentations recorded from talk shows such as NBC's "Tomorrow Show"
7) "Green Eye Shades vs. Chi Squares" - originally aired over WSUI in Iowa City
8) Recordings of speakers on campus or at conventions
9) Locally produced tapes of interviews with professionals

b. Films

1) "Free Press vs. Fair Trial--The Sheppard Case"
2) "The Front Page"
3) "Freedom of Speech"

4) "Obscenity and the Law"
5) "Oh What a Lovely War"
6) "He Who Must Die"
7) "A Word is Worth a Thousand Pictures"
8) "The Right to Know" (Knight Newspapers)
9) "Selling of the Pentagon"
10) "I.F. Stone's Weekly"
11) "T.V. and Politics"
12) "Never a Backward Step"
13) "Lost Strayed Stolen"
14) "Harold and Cynthia"

C. Video-Tapes

1) "The First and Essential Freedom" (ABC News)
2) "CBS News Retrospective"
3) "Murrow vs. McCarthy"
4) "Freedom of the Press" (Jack Anderson)
5) "You and the Commercial" (CBS)
6) "Mirror, Mirror on the World" (PBS)

d. Slide/tape

1) "Conflicts in Managing the News" (set put out by Washington Post through Harper and Row Audio Visuals; cost $550)

## V. THE VALUE SYSTEM OF ETHICS COURSES

Assuming there are four primary ethical orientations, one set of questions in the survey of instructors was designed to determine which value system formed the basis of classroom presentation and discussion.

VALUE SYSTEM STRESSED

| | No. of courses | % |
|---|---|---|
| Secular Humanism (strong values but without religious orientation) | 30 | 47% |
| Judaeo-Christian | 15 | 23% |
| Utilitarianism (whatever works most effectively decided case-by-case) | 07 | 09% |
| Positivism (social convention determines values) | 04 | 06% |
| None in particular | 17 | 27% |

Table 7

Twenty-seven percent of 64 schools teaching ethics claim that they do not stress any ethical system in particular. The word "stressed" in the question may have made some respondents wary. In a pluralistic society promoting the individual conscience, we characteristically do not wish to impose our values on anyone--even in the teaching/student relationship. "Stress" may appear too dictatorial. But if that possible distortion is not a substantial one, this large percentage could indicate these courses are not well developed, or it could point to the more disturbing possibility that if no specific value system is emphasized one option tends to be viewed as acceptable as any other. Obviously in that situation the lowest common denominator usually evolves, which in the American situation means civil law.

Utilitarianism in some sense has dominated our general ethical scene, yet it scores an amazingly small percentage (9%) in media course work. One respondent may have suggested a reason: "Utilitarianism: Do you really mean Nixonian ethics?" One overflow of business and political scandal may be an increasing scrutiny of and contempt for a value system which seems to breed this kind of abuse.

Several of the respondents marked more than one framework for their course. Six (10%), for example, combined Judaeo-Christian and Secular Humanism. Since the two orientations stand so antithetically to each other, such association seems unusual indeed. Perhaps the combinations indicated that in certain matters one viewpoint was emphasized and those of a different type called for a different perspective. Though the religious orientation of all the schools is not known in detail, there is no indication that the percentage promoting a Judaeo-Christian perspective varies at all from state universities to private religious colleges.

Seventeen percent marked none of the 4 value systems, nor did they choose the "none in particular." Writing in their own response they listed such guiding value systems as "public interest" and "socialist humanism." Three included "social responsibility" and two said "Anglo-American common law." Three insisted that they did not stress any system in class, but pressed students to formulate their own personal ethics. Two complained that they did not know how to respond.

Reading through those marked "other" and noting the unusual responses in this section as a whole, indicate that the matter of principal foundations is not very well worked out for nearly 50% of all the courses taught.

## VI. TEXTBOOK MATERIALS USED

A review of the course outlines yielded the following choices for textbooks in the 64 courses on mass media ethics. Listed below in Table 8, in order of popularity, are those texts mentioned 2 or more times as required:

TEXTBOOKS PREFERRED IN MEDIA ETHICS COURSES

| | No. of Courses | % |
|---|---|---|
| Hulteng (Messenger's Motives) | 21 | 33% |
| Merrill/Barney (Ethics and Press) | 07 | 11% |
| Nelson/Teeter (Law of Mass Comm.) | 07 | 11% |
| Rivers/Schramm (Resp. in Mass Comm.) | 05 | 08% |
| Gross (Responsibility of Press) | 03 | 05% |
| Francois (Mass Media Law and Regul.) | 03 | 05% |
| Gillmor/Barron (Mass Comm. Law) | 03 | 05% |
| None | 09 | 14% |
| Other | 12 | 19% |

Table 8

Again the percentages do not total 100 because 8 courses require more than one textbook. Of these 8, 6 combine law and ethics and assign at least 1 book in each area. One course requires both Hulteng and Merrill/Barney, and another requires both Hulteng and Rivers/Schramm.

All the courses require articles in addition to texts and 9 courses use no text at all but articles exclusively. Eight of the 9 choose this option for 3 reasons: a) dissatisfaction with the textbooks available; b) the flexibility of using articles allows them more freedom to structure the course according to personal taste; and c) texts are quickly out of date (8 respondents--an amazing 13%--mentioned this problem) especially for courses emphasizing the case study approach. One respondent assigns no text for principal reasons: "I never use textbooks because they are essentially part of mass culture, the very entity we seek to criticize."

The question on the survey about textbooks was open-ended, and all respondents used the opportunity to pass judgment on the textbook material required.

Six of the respondents (10%) were positive, though not ecstatic. Terms such as "good," "adequate," "generally favorable," "improved in the last few years," "okay," "helpful as springboard to classroom discussion" characterized the evaluations. One response typifies the spirit of most: "What we have indicates progress, but available material is barely adequate at present. The market is still new, however, and I hope more challenging texts will soon emerge."

Regarding specific texts, the most popular one (Hulteng's) received generally favorable comments: "The best so far," "practical," "better than others I've used." Merrill/Barney was positively evaluated by those who like anthologies, though most instructors suggest that a systematic unified textbook would be more helpful for them than a reader. "The tone of the book I like," wrote one typical person, "is Rivers/Schramm but it is outdated."

Fifty percent of the instructors are negative about existing material, some of them unhappy to the extreme. Typical answers: "I know of no textbook even remotely satisfactory;" "all I have used are terrible;" "most are not analytical enough and void of principles;" "why can't the theoretical and practical be balanced better;" "there should be more solid material which compiles several views on one issue in depth;" "the texts are so light even the students complain about lack of substance."

Requests for help and advice were included by several respondents: "I have assigned a regular text in the past, but probably will turn to readings in the future as I have not found one that truly fits my needs. Any suggestions?" With other areas of mass media study crowded with material, certainly the same is not true here.

## VII. OBSERVATIONS

Basically this survey gathers nuts-and-bolts material. It identifies schools presently teaching specific ethics courses and indicates in general terms the present state-of-the-art in ethics instruction. All such results seem essential before extensive research and debate can fruitfully advance in this area. While primarily interested in describing what currently exists, some immediate observations and assessments emerge from the data.

1. Media ethics are in a very rudimentary, unsophisticated form at present. There is little agreement vis-a-vis the place of ethical codes, what a normative view entails, what value system to employ. Only 6 (10%) are fully trained in philosophical ethics and the pedagogical techniques employed are decidely average. One person added this comment to his survey which I suspect is fairly accurate: "I fear that too few teachers of journalism are clear in their minds about what ethics is and how it relates to their work; I doubt, in fact, if even your survey can be significant for this reason." Thomas McMahon's study of business schools indicated that in 1975, 39% teach specific ethics courses (56% of graduate programs). The media's 27% falls far behind. Another professional area, bio-medical ethics, has generated an enormous volume of literature, workshops, instructional aids, and conferences. Whether ethics can be taught in the classroom remains a debatable issue which cannot be answered theoretically anyhow. The problematics will only be resolved through continued experimentation. In any case, on a comparative basis with other programs having a professional dimension, communications seems less developed by a substantial margin.

2. The basic pedagogical debate which emerges is over a specific course or absorbing ethics into the curriculum as a whole. This difference in educational philosophy is worthy of open discussion. Further evaluation and research could help determine the pedagogical efficacy of these two approaches. That divergence will need clarification and further articulation before we can begin outlining the ideal program of ethical instruction. The one option seems more natural, more nearly like the situational, inductive necessities which professionals face throughout their careers. However--given the soft spots which appear at virtually all levels of the survey--one wonders whether our not having courses results from ignorance about ethics as a discipline, therefore treating it in very functional ad hoc terms. As a minimum, those who scatter issues around the program should be pressed with the following questions: Is everyone just assuming ethical matters are being treated or is the faculty certain; who covers the issues and how; what normative framework is presented; are students forced to delineate why they hold their point of view? A concerted and systematic effort appears essential for sensitizing students. The complexity of modern ethical dilemmas would seem to require a specific course in the curriculum and a teacher who has specialized in ethics as a discipline. That conclusion filters through the data even though 73% feel a special course is unnecessary.

3. Among those committed to a specific course in ethics, there is a fundamental disagreement over the location of that course. Only 3 place this course in the philosophy department and 2 team-teach it (using an ethicist and journalist). The other 59 (92%) offer it within the communications curriculum. In this latter category, 1 school uses an instructor with a Ph.D. in Philosophy and the course therefore reflects a principal orientation to ethics as an academic enterprise. Nearly all of them, however--even though they have a course devoted solely to ethics--tend to treat the subject matter inductively as do the schools without such courses. This small number of courses geared directly to philosophical ethics exhibit a clear sense of direction and have a definite conceptual framework. Whether this raises ethical awareness among students more than the scatter-shot approach needs further investigation. It does seem to avoid simplistic personal moralism in its attempt to articulate a more sophisticated social ethics. While personal integrity is basic, over the long run professionals would seem to act more beneficiently if they move beyond the inherent value system of the decision-maker to the point where social values are incorporated in professional behavior. In this area, as in conclusion 2 above, one side appears to have the larger numbers but the other side the better case.